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ABSTRACT

Empathy is a personality attribute involving the capacity to respond emotionally, cognitively, and communicatively to other persons without loss of objectivity and identity. Empathy is linked with helping behavior and with more effective professional functioning. The aim of this study was to investigate relations between empathy and personality dimensions in special educators in comparison to the teachers of primary and secondary schools, the mechanisms underlying these phenomena, and connections between loneliness and burnout syndrome. Participants were 98 teachers, ages 25 to 56 years, including 25 men and 73 women. Thirty teachers worked with disabled children, 30 teachers taught in primary schools, and 38 teachers worked in secondary schools. The survey results showed differences in the level of empathy between special educators and other groups of teachers. Empathy seemed to be connected with personality. The mechanisms underlying the development of empathetic components and dimensions of personality could be both physiological and social in character. Empathy could protect the teachers against feelings of loneliness and burnout syndrome. It is concluded that empathy should be specially included in teachers' training. (Contains 17 references.) (Author/ND)

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EMPATHY IN THE STRUCTURE OF PERSONALITY OF SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Abstract

Empathy is holistic process, and a personality attribute involving the capacity to respond emotionally, cognitively, and communicatively to other persons without loss of objectivity and identity. Empathy is linked with helping behaviour and with more effective professional functioning (Williams, 1989), is also nearly valued by the helping professions. One of important helping professions is teaching.

It was proved that empathy helps teachers in their difficult work (Morgan, 1983,1984).

The aim of presented study was to investigate relations between empathy and personality dimensions in special educators in comparison to the teachers of primary and secondary schools, the mechanisms underlying these phenomena, and connections between loneliness and burnout syndrome.

The teachers (N=98) ages 25 to 56 years, the average age was 33.2 years. In the group there were 25 men and 73 women. 30 teachers worked with disabled children, 30 teachers tough in primary schools, and 38 teachers worked in secondary schools.

In the study we used: Scale of Emotional Empathy by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972), Questionnaire of Empathetic Understanding of Other People constructed by Weglinski (1983), the Battle Self-esteem Scale, Form AD of 40 items (1981), Eysenck Personality Inventory MPI, Strelau Questionnaire of Temperament (1983), the UCLA Loneliness Scale with 20 statements by Russell, Peplan, Ferguson (1978), Maslach Burnout Inventory (1981) and Rotter Measure of Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966).

The results showed that there are differences in the level of empathy between special educators and other groups of teachers. The empathy was connected with personality. The mechanisms underlying the development of empathetic components and dimensions of personality could be both physiological and social in character. Components of empathy could protect the teachers against feeling of loneliness and burnout syndrome, so we conclude that empathy should be specially trained during teachers' training.

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Introduction

Empathy is conceived as a holistic process of the human organism which has a positive influence on the quality of life.

In the process of empathy several components are present: physiological, kinesthetic, affective and cognitive as well as motivational factors. Sensitivity is the main affective component of empathy, in which a person temporary identifies himself with another person's life and shares his or her ideas and emotions. Cognitive components means the identifying and evaluation of emotions, the capacity to take another person's role or point of view. The kinesthetic factors are, e.g. mimics, gestures, body movements, voice modulation. Physiological reactions connected with affective processes could be mentioned also as physiological factors of empathy (Kalliopuska, 1983, 1992).

Empathy is a personality attribute involving the capacity to respond emotionally, cognitively, and communicatively to other persons without loss of objectivity and identity. Empathy is linked with helping behavior and with more effective professional functioning (Williams, 1989) and is nearly valued by the helping professions. One of important helping professions is teaching. It was proved that empathy helps teachers in their difficult work (Morgan, 1983, 1984).

Empathy is associated with self control wherein role-taking operates as one evaluative factor. Empathy requires also development of personal self-esteem. Self-esteem means, among others, approving of, respecting, and being content with oneself (Battle, 1981).

We put following particular questions:

1) What are the relations between emotional and cognitive components of empathy and such dimensions of personality as extroversion, neuroticism, locus of control, self-esteem, and temperamental traits?

2) What are the common basic mechanisms underlying the empathy and personality?

Nowadays more and more people experience the feeling of loneliness. It is experienced not only when there is a lack of human relations but also when these relations are abundant but unsatisfactory. Negatively experienced loneliness may provoke depression, anxiety, neuroticism, and may also include disturbances of self-esteem.

Burnout is a work-related stress syndrome characterized by depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and loss of personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, 1981) Burnout is connected with stress of human service occupations as nurses, teachers, therapists. Burnout and empathy are both critically important concepts for study concerning helping professions. So we put the question:

3) Could empathy protect teachers against the feeling of loneliness and burnout syndrome?

Method

Subjects:

The teachers (N=98) aged 25 to 56 years were tested, the average age was 33.2 years. In the group there were 25 men and 73 women, 30 teachers worked with disabled children, 30 teachers tough in primary schools, and 38 teachers worked insecondary schools

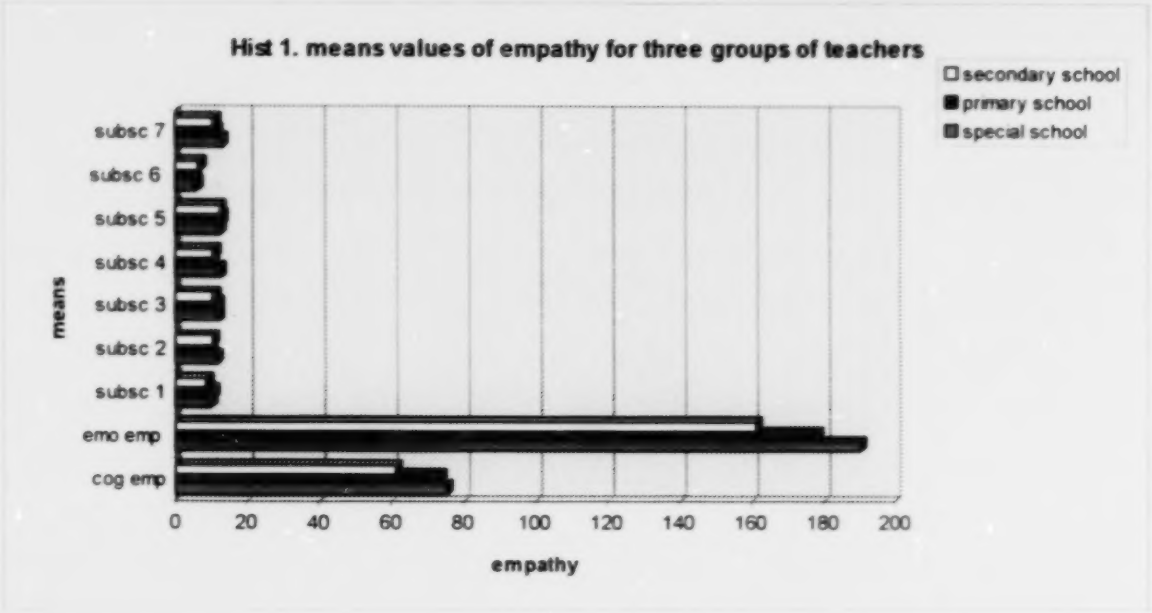
Measures:

In the study we used: the Questionnaire of Empathetic Understanding of Other People by Weglinski (1983), and the Scale of Emotional Empathy by Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) in which there are seven different subscales: 1) Susceptibility to emotional contagion, 2) Appreciation of the feelings of unfamiliar and distant people, 3) Extreme emotional responsiveness, 4) Tendency to be moved by others' positive emotional experience, 5) Tendency to be moved by others' negative emotional experience, 6) Sympathetic tendency, 7) Willingness to be in contact with others who have problems.

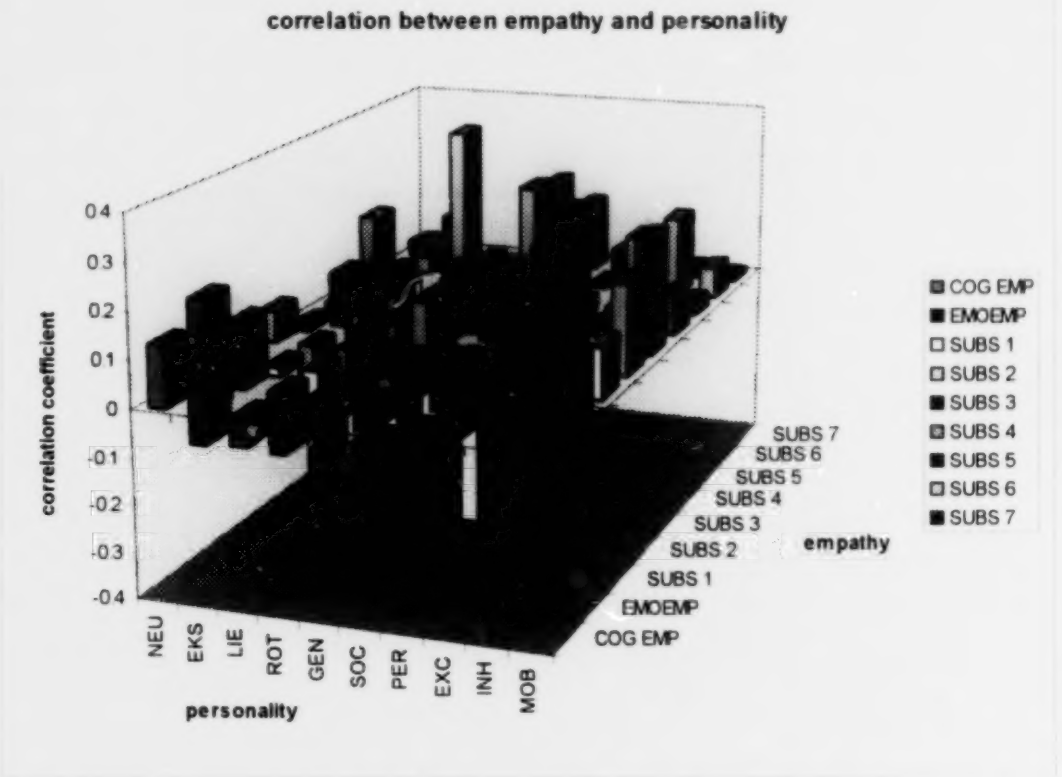
We also used: the Battle Self-esteem Scale, Form AD of 40 items (1981), Eysenck Personality Inventory MPI, Strelau Questionnaire of Temperament (Strelau,1983), UCLA Loneliness Scale with 20 statements by Russell, Peplan, Ferguson (1978), the Maslach Burnout Inventory (1981), and Rotter Measure of Locus of Control (Rotter, 1966).

Results

One-Way analysis of variance and testes for homogenity of variances were conducted to find differences between the mentioned groups of teachers in the level of empathy. The level of emotional and cognitive empathy of special educators was significantly higher than the teachers of secondary schools ($F=13.8$, $p=0.001$; $F=17.4$, $p=0.001$), but teachers' of special schools empathy was not significantly higher that empathy of primary school teachers (see histogram 1).



The data analysis based on Person correlations showed many different relations between cognitive and emotional facets of empathy and dimensions of personality (see histogram 2 or table1).



We found following significant correlations:

1) Cognitive empathy was positively related to extroversion, and mobility of behavior, and negatively to personal self-esteem.

2) Emotional empathy was positively correlated with general self-esteem.

3) Susceptibility to emotional contagion (Subscale 1) was negatively connected with personal self-esteem.

4) Extreme emotional responsiveness (Subscale 3) was positively correlated with strength of excitation and mobility of behavior.

5) Sympathetic tendency (Subscale 6) was negatively connected with neuroticism and positively with lie and general self-esteem.

6) Willingness to be in contact with others who have problems (Subscale 7) was related to internal locus of control.

Empathy and its' components were also significantly correlated with feeling of loneliness and burnout syndrome (see histogram 3 or table 2).

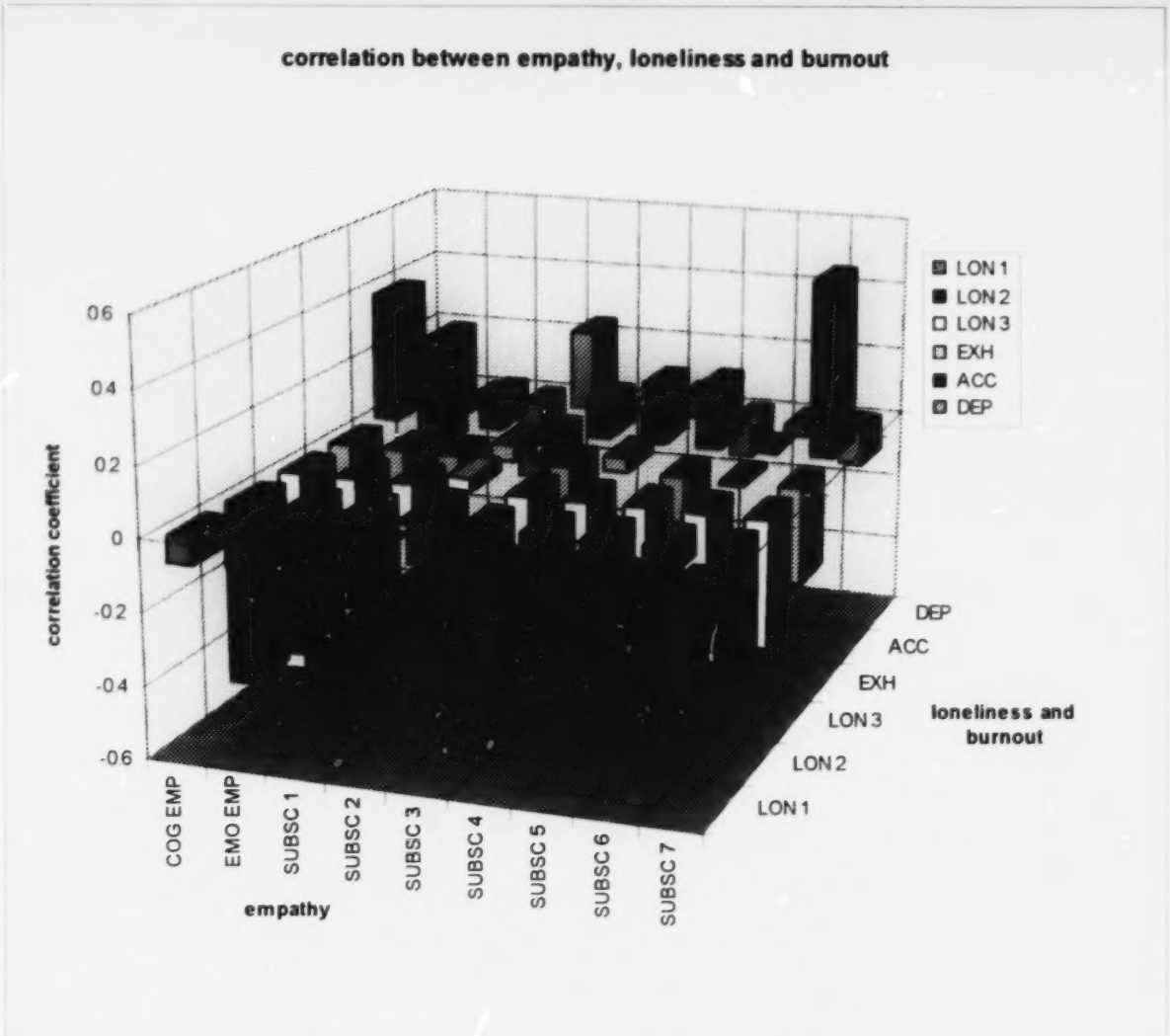
1) Loneliness in aspect of lack intimate relations with others was netively correlated with high level of tendency to be moved by others' positive emotional experiences (Subscale 4) and willingness to be in contact with others who have problems (Subscale 7).

2) Loneliness in aspects of brake off relationships with others and lack of belonging and affiliation were negatively correlated with cognitive aspect of empathy and emotional and especially susceptibility to emotional contagion (Subscale 1), tendency to be moved by others' negative experience (Subscale 5) and willingness to be in contact with others who have problems (Subscale 7).

3) Willingness to be in contact with others who have problems (Subscale 7) was negatively related to burnout in aspect of emotional exhaustion.

4) Increasing of personal accomplishment was related to cognitive aspect of empathy and emotional empathy and specially willingness to be in contact with others who have problems(Subscale7)

5) Depersonalization was negatively correlated with high level of susceptibility to emotional contagion (Subscale 1) and positively with low level of appreciation of the feelings of unfamiliar and distant people (Subscale 2).



Discussion

According to our results components of empathy are related to such temperamental traits as strength of excitation and mobility of behaviour, in the meaning of Strelau's theory (1983) and also with Eysenck's dimensions of hierarchical personality structure: extroversion and neuroticism (1970). These dimensions have common arousability components. Arousability is a measure of how much one is affected emotionally by complex, unusual or varied events. Empathetic tendency is in part a subcategory of arousability (Mehrabian et al. 1988) and the mechanism underlying the development of these dimensions could be partly common to physiological mechanism related to functioning of nervous system.

Extroversion is connected with high level of sensation-seeking (Eysenck, Zuckerman, 1978), mobility of behavior and low level of neuroticism (Strelau, 1983) so extrovertive people are ready to be in many different relations with other people. They want to understand others but they are resistant to emotional contagion. Our findings showed that decreasing of sympathetic tendency follows the higher level of neuroticism. Self concentration and the feelings of fear and insecurity make sympathy to others impossible because neurotic people want to avoid emotional risk connected with social interactions.

The level of self-esteem is related to empathy. General self-esteem involve emotional sensitivity and sympathetic tendency to other people, but high level of personal self-esteem is followed by decreasing of cognitive empathy and emotional contagion. People with low level of personal self-esteem seek for identity group so they are willing to understand others and share their emotions.

Internal locus of control is related to willingness to be in contact with people who have problems. This result is similar to those designed by Phares (1976). When the person feels that he can control environment and his own behavior he is more ready to help other people, because he can find many different solutions of their problems.

Such dimensions of personality as self-esteem and locus of control develop during social functioning so the common mechanism underlying the development of these dimensions and empathy could have social character and could be based on mechanism of social learning and imitation (Miller, Dollard, 1941, Rotter, 1966, Bandura, 1977).

We found that component of cognitive and emotional empathy was negatively correlated with loneliness feelings. Staying in helpful contacts with others people, sensitivity, ability of sharing others' emotions and points of view help the people to avoid feeling of loneliness.

Conscious willingness to be in contact with people who have problems is negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion in teachers. Emotional and cognitive empathy is realted to high personal accomplishment and low depersonalisation. That suggests that the teachers who feel more satisfaction in their work are more empathetic. It might have happened because they choose their profession in more determined and aware way. Our findings show that in multidimensional structure of burnout (Maslach, 1993) empathy might be important variable.

Correlation between empathy and dimensions of temperament and personality show that empathy is one of the primary dimension related to the functioning of nervous system. On this base correlations between empathy and loneliness and burnout might be interpreted, that empathy might protect the teachers agains burnout and burnout syndrom.

In presented study we analised simple relation between variables. In the further study it is important to look for more complicated relations and interactions between empathy and temperamental and personality dimensions in teachers.

Conclusions

The presented study led us to the following particular conclusions.

1) Emotional and cognitive components of empathy are related to such dimensions of personality as extroversion, neuroticism, locus of control, self-esteem, and such temperamental traits as strangth of excitation and mobility of behaviour.

2) The mechanisms underlying the development of empathetic components and dimensions of personality could be both physiological and social in character.

3) Components of empathy might protect against feeling of loneliness and burnout syndrome in teachers, so empathy should be specially trained during teachers' training.

Table 1.

Correlations between empathy and dimensions of personality

Var	COG EMP	EMO EMP	SUBS 1	SUBS 2	SUBS 3	SUBS 4	SUBS 5	SUBS 6	SUBS 7
NEU	0.13	-0.13	0.06	0.07	-0.02	-0.03	0.04	**-0.29***	0.03
EKS	**0.23***	0.14	-0.02	-0.12	0.12	0.21	0.01	0.04	0.10
LIE	-0.06	-0.13	-0.09	-0.14	0.01	-0.20	-0.16	**0.35****	-0.01
ROT	-0.04	-0.20	-0.02	-0.03	-0.14	-0.02	-0.09	-0.18	**-0.32****
GEN	0.05	**0.26***	-0.10	0.12	0.15	0.11	0.08	**0.23***	0.21
SOC	0.14	0.09	-0.07	-0.05	0.16	-0.01	0.13	0.08	0.16
PER	**-0.22***	0.10	**-0.29***	0.01	0.01	0.11	-0.03	0.01	0.05
EXC	0.07	0.06	-0.08	0.07	**0.30***	-0.08	-0.02	0.13	0.02
INH	0.06	0.05	0.02	0.08	0.03	-0.08	-0.06	0.18	0.02
MOB	**0.28***	0.18	0.11	0.20	**0.26***	0.09	0.03	0.07	0.01

* - $p<.05$ ** - $p<.01$

NEU - neuroticism
EKS - ekstroversion
LIE - lie
ROT - locus of control
GEN - general self-esteem
SOC - social self-esteem
PER - personal self-esteem

COG EMP - cognitive empathy
EMO EMP - emotional empathy
SUBS 1 to SUBS 7 - subscales of Emotional Empathy Scale
EXC - strength of excitation
INH - strength of inhibition
MOB - mobility of behavior

Table 2

Correlations between empathy, loneliness and burnout syndrome

VAR	COG EMP	EMO EMP	SUBS 1	SUBS 2	SUBS3	SUBS 4	SUBS 5	SUBS 6	SUBS 7
LON 1	- 07	- 06	.04	.01	.12	**-.24***	- 04	- 15	**-.25***
LON 2	**-.51****	**-.40****	**-.25***	- 01	- 15	- 16	**-.32****	- 07	**-.36****
LON 3	**-.57****	**-.33****	- 09	.03	- 15	- 11	**-.33****	- 18	**-.35****
EXH	- 18	- 17	- 07	.04	- 10	.04	- 21	- 01	**-.27***
ACC	**.38****	**.26***	.10	- 09	.11	.17	.18	.01	**.51****
DEP	- 16	- 03	**-.23***	**.23***	- 01	.05	- 10	- 02	- 10

* - p< 05 ** - p< 01

LON 1 - lack intimate relation with others
LON 2 - break off relationships with others
LON 3 - lack belongings and affiliation
EXH - exhaustion
ACC - personal accomplishment
DEP - depersonalization

COG EMP - cognitive empathy
EMO EMP - emotional empathy
SUBS 1 to SUBS 7 - subscales of Emotional Empathy Scale

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